

A GOOD OLD AGE.

A

S E R M O N ,

PREACHED AT KING'S CHAPEL,

SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 1841,

ON THE DEATH OF

JOSEPH MAY, ESQ.,

AGED LXXXI YEARS.

BY F. W. P. GREENWOOD, D. D.

PRINTED AT THE REQUEST OF THE FAMILY OF THE DECEASED.

BOSTON:

PRINTED BY S. N. DICKINSON,

52 Washington Street.

.....

1841.

A GOOD OLD AGE.

SEP 14 1918

A

S E R M O N ,

PREACHED AT KING'S CHAPEL,

SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 1841,

ON THE DEATH OF

JOSEPH MAY, ESQ.,

AGED LXXXI YEARS.

BY F. W. P. GREENWOOD, D. D.

PRINTED AT THE REQUEST OF THE FAMILY OF THE DECEASED.




BOSTON:

PRINTED BY S. N. DICKINSON,

52 Washington Street.

.....

1841.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2017 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Alternates

B
M4665g

S E R M O N .

GENESIS XV. 15.

“AND THOU SHALT GO TO THY FATHERS IN PEACE ; THOU SHALT BE
BURIED IN A GOOD OLD AGE.”

MOST men would fain be made partakers of this divine promise to Abram, though the fulfilment of the desire, so general and so natural, is granted to but few. The love of life, wisely and mercifully implanted, is so tenacious, and life itself, under any but the most uncommon circumstances, offers so great a balance of happiness and ease, that long life is generally regarded as a blessing ; and at almost any common period of our earthly existence, we would still have it protracted a while longer, and yet a while longer, indefinitely.

Besides this, there is the vision of old age, which often presents itself before us with great attractiveness, and in the most pleasing colors, especially after we have passed the season of childhood, which either sees it not, or not with favor. It is the vision of a quiet and shady resting place, dressed for us by younger hands, and appointed unto us by a kind Providence, after we have borne the burden and heat of the day. It is the vision of a

BURTON HIST. COLLECTION

DETROIT

EXCHANGE DUPLICATE

UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS LIBRARY
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

retired and moss-grown oratory, in which, without fear of disturbance by the noisy and sacrilegious passions, we may sedately “kneel upon our knees,” and fold our hands, and say our prayers, before we lie down to sleep. Or, taking a more domestic character, it is the vision of a peaceful corner in a peaceful room, reserved for our last decaying years, and tended by the assiduities of home, where we may sit for a term in the arm-chair appropriated to our comfort, and discourse with old friends about the old things which we have seen together, and tell our inquiring juniors of events which already belong to history, or which are only kept alive in our memory, — and then turn aside from these matters, and lend an indulgent ear to the prattle of little children.

No wonder if we dwell with some fondness and longing on visions like these. No wonder if these visions, and the love of life together, move us to regard old age as a blessing, and to desire it for ourselves and for our friends. But we well know to how small a number of our race, comparatively, the visions are fulfilled, and how many are denied the inheritance of that blessing. Many blossoms are blighted and fall, for one that ripens into fruit. The looked for rest of age is anticipated by the deeper rest of the grave; and no one can live to be old, without being called to this trial at least — that he must be the frequent witness of early funerals.

But here the consolation must be brought in, that though old age may be a blessing, it is not a para-

mount blessing, nor the only blessing, and that to many it might be no blessing. Though the apparent mercy is the permission to live long, yet the real mercy may be, and in many cases doubtless is, to be taken away soon from the evil to come. It cannot be without a purpose, and consequently a good purpose, that the all-wise Creator and Disposer calls away his young children from this earthly scene; and therefore we may well suppose that death may be the chosen blessing to such, though age may be also a blessing to those who are summoned later. There are coronets for childhood, as well as crowns for old age; and blessings from the full hand of the Lord are dispensed to every intermediate hour of our human existence.

And besides this, I read in the text not of old age merely, but of a *good* old age, which implies something more than a sum of silent years, scored like bare marks against the individual's name. Other Scripture tells me that gray hairs are a crown to the head which is found in the way of righteousness; and from all Scripture I draw the inference, that the only honorable and desirable old age is that which has laid up some store of wisdom and virtue, and can look back on a life which has been passed in the fear and love and obedience of God. Every year of a sinful and shameful life is but an added weight of sin and shame, and surely not of glory. Merely to attain to the years of old age, therefore, without wisdom, without honor, without piety, would

not be to secure a blessing, but rather to subject ourselves to a heavier reprobation. And seeing that it is not in our power to reach, by our own efforts, the more distant limits of life, it is our first interest so to conduct ourselves in our journey, that if we are carried forward to those limits by the Lord of life and death, we may find that blessing there which is only to be found in his service. In this way only can we go to our fathers in peace, and be buried in a good old age. And if we are stopped short in our pilgrimage, if we are summoned away in the midst of our work, we shall still inherit the blessing of those who die in the Lord, which is the greatest of all beatitudes.

In every period of life, then, we see that it should be our chief care, while we look forward to longer life, to fulfil the ends of life, as in the sight and presence of its Author. A virtuous youth and useful manhood must prepare the way for a good old age and a peaceful departure. This preparation is indispensable. Without it, old age is not good, not honorable, not blessed. It can wear no crown, because none has been woven for it by the hands of former industry; no materials for it have been gathered by the diligence of preceding years.

Let us consider, for a moment, what are some of the constituent parts of this necessary preparation for a good and venerable and happy old age.

1. There must be, in the first place, the preparation of a life of action. Idleness, sloth, self-indul-

gence, defeat the purposed end. There is no true rest which has not first been earned. We cannot break the great law of labor, and enjoy the rewards of labor also. Whether with our hands or our heads, we must work. Whether in the busy resorts of men, or in the retired and lamp-lighted study, still we must work, with such intervals of relaxation as nature demands and reason grants. Habitual indolence, as well as actual transgression, is habitual disobedience to the laws of nature, of reason, of society, and of God. "God never allowed any man," says Bp. Hall, "to do nothing. How miserable is the condition of those men, who spend their time as if it were given to them, and not lent; as if hours were waste creatures, and such as never should be accounted for; as if God would take this for a good bill of reckoning — *Item*, spent upon my pleasures, forty years!" There is a part in the world for every one who is born into it to perform; a place for every one to fill. If the part and the place should chance to be of no repute in the eyes of men, they are not therefore mean in the sight of God, who looks mainly to disposition and duty, and will honor those with his crown who honor him with their service. A life of idleness or empty pleasure is the really disreputable life. It cannot be a preparation for anything which is good: for of itself it is naught and evil, and consequently it cannot be followed by a good old age. A good old age is a result and not a fortuity. It can no more grow out of

an idle youth and manhood, than a fruitful branch can spring from a dead stock. It is of too great value to be bestowed for nothing. It must be prepared for and worked for.

2. There must be, in the next place, the preparation of self-improvement. Though we are required to be active and to work while the working season lasts, our labor is not to be like that of brute animals or mechanical engines. The work of a man must minister, directly or indirectly, to the mind and heart of a man. Or, if this be in some cases hardly to be brought about, our daily work must at least be made to admit of other means and modes of intellectual and moral cultivation. At all events, the man must not neglect his human capacities. The power and opportunity of spiritual instruction do not, it is true, belong equally to all; but some power and some opportunity belong to all. If many books be wanting, or time to read them, let a few be faithfully perused, and faithfully applied. Three books are always at hand, for every one, which are wonderful and full of wisdom, — the Bible; the volume of nature; and the records of human experience and intercourse. From these and all available sources, the mind is to be fed and stored. If it should not be, it will be found starved and empty, when the winter of age sets in. A good old age is a comfortable old age, and it cannot be comfortable without some provision of inward sustenance; it cannot be comfortable when its heart is dry, and its lustreless

eyes are fixed upon vacancy. A good old age is not a blank, a void, a dumbness; but a treasury, abundant in information and counsel. It does not linger along tediously, a weariness to itself and others, but it lives and moves, strong and cheerful in self-derived and independent resources.

3. But not for ourselves alone must we labor, not even for our spiritual improvement alone, in order to prepare for a good old age: but also in the sacred cause of charity, and for the benefit of others. To have been active for our own advantage merely, to have read and conversed for our own satisfaction and improvement merely, is not having done enough for the desired and desirable end. How is old age good unless it is acknowledged to be so by those who feel its goodness? How is it blessed, unless they who have been relieved, encouraged, or in some way aided, shall rise up, as it passes by, and call it blessed? No charitable deed is ever thrown away; no kind word is ever wasted on the air. Let us be assured, if we need any arguments for a life of benevolence, that every benevolent action is safely laid by, to make up the result of a good old age, a beloved and honored old age, whose every gray hair is respected, whose least word is hearkened to, and whose departure from this scene is mourned with sincere mourning. Love must contribute a share, and a very large share, to the preparation for a good old age; and love is in no way to be secured but by kind offices. Without these, which are in the power and gift of

the poorest, we cannot have love, and without love it is vain to expect a good old age.

4. Once more, there must be the preparation of religion. How can tottering old age support itself without that staff? How can it be revered without that ornament and dignity? Who will say, that there can be a good old age without that foundation of righteousness; a happy old age without that comfort and solace and sure resort? If the old man would himself be honored, he must be one who honors his Maker. He must be one who puts his whole trust and confidence in God, and is grateful for that divine mercy and direction by which his wants have been supplied and his steps upheld and guided all his life long. Piety is the completion of that preparation which is required for a good old age; and without it, it cannot be complete. I should add, what I believe to be certainly true, that the habitual love and trust of piety are not apt to appear in the life suddenly, and are not such states and conditions of the character as to be commanded at the moment when a man feels himself to be growing old. They are of slower and more careful production. They are to be cultivated betimes. They are to be made early inmates of the house and the bosom. Then old age will wear them naturally and easily, and there will be no suspicion of their genuineness, and no doubt of their value and power. It will always be thought too easy to begin to be religious in old age, when there is so little tempta-

tion to be any thing else ; and to be an act, likewise, rather of fear than of love, because old age is known by all to be in evident neighborhood with the grave. The change to religion from indifference, or irreligion, is, indeed, at any season or period, to be hailed with joy ; but the beauty of religion is its constancy, and the proof of constancy is only to be had from time. It is not treating it as its infinite worth deserves, to invite it to take up its first residence in a worn and wearied heart ; and though it is long suffering, and will not refuse to come, yet it cannot manifest its whole and proper nature in such an abode, and on such a call. Religion must shine upon our manhood, and then it will be the lustre of our old age, and then only.

A life of action, of self-improvement, of benevolence, of piety — such is the preparation for a good old age ; an old age which in the highest sense shall be acknowledged to be good.

And such was the preparation which was made for *his* old age, by a well known member of this church, who, having finished a long course of usefulness on earth, is now gone to his fathers in peace. His old age was emphatically a good old age ; and it was so, because he had made the due preparations, and laid the firm foundations for it long ago. Of the active in society, he was among the most active : there were few, not professedly students, who had a greater love of literature, and a more ardent desire

of self-culture than he had ; his heart was full of benevolence and sympathy toward his fellow creatures ; and a sober and trusting piety toward God his Creator was the very light and guide of his life.

Mr. May belonged to a generation which has now almost wholly passed away. A few yet linger, but they will soon be all gone. He may be regarded as a type and specimen, not indeed of what was most brilliant and distinguished, but of what was most solid and worthy, staunch, honest, upright, and true in that generation. He was a native of this city ; his life was passed in the open sight of his fellow citizens, and the testimony which I render is only the repetition of the common voice.

His integrity has never been questioned. It passed safely through the trial of adversity and failure in business — a trial which has proved too severe for the strength of many — and was as confidently relied upon after that change as before it. Perfect proof of this is given by the fact that he was called on to fill several offices, which, though not conspicuous, involved important trusts, and supposed implicit confidence, and which were held till repeated intimations of increasing age warned him to resign them.

His ideas and feelings respecting riches, though not perhaps peculiar, were certainly not common. He regarded the gift of property to one's children a questionable good. He has often said, that he knew many promising youth who were stunted in

their intellectual and moral growth by the expectation of an inheritance that would relieve them from the necessity of labor. Every man, he would add, should stand upon his own feet, rely upon his own resources, know how to take care of himself, supply his own wants; and that parent does his child no good, who takes from him the inducement, nay, the necessity to do so.*

He thought it well and proper, to engage in the pursuit of property in some honest and honorable occupation, as one of the means of unfolding the faculties, and forming and establishing the character. But he considered it most unworthy of a rational and moral being, to seek after riches as the *chief good*. He utterly despised avarice.

When about thirty-eight years of age, he was stopped in the midst of a very profitable business, in which he had already acquired a considerable fortune, by the result of an ill-advised speculation. He foresaw that he must fail, and at once gave up all his property, "even to the ring on his finger,

* In a communication received since the delivery of this discourse, from the Rev. S. J. May, is an anecdote which deserves preservation, as illustrative of the sentiments of his father.

"When I brought to him my last College bill receipted, he folded it with an emphatic pressure of his hand, saying as he did it: 'My son, I am rejoiced that you have gotten through; and that I have been able to afford you the advantages you have enjoyed. If you have been faithful, you must now be possessed of an education that will enable you to go any where; stand up among your fellow-men; and by serving them in one department of usefulness or another, make yourself worthy of a comfortable livelihood, if no more. If you have not improved your advantages, or should be hereafter slothful, I thank God that I have not property to leave you, that will hold you up in a place among men, where you will not deserve to stand.'"

for the benefit of his creditors." The suffering which this disaster caused revealed to him that he had become more eager for property, and had allowed himself to regard its possession more highly, than was creditable to his understanding or good for his heart. After some days of deep depression, he formed the resolution, *never to be a rich man*; but to withstand all temptations to engage again in the pursuit of wealth. He adhered to this determination. He resolutely refused several very advantageous offers of partnership in lucrative concerns, and sought rather the situation he held, for more than forty years, in an Insurance Office, where he would receive a competence only for his family.

When in the midst of his family he seemed to have no anxieties about business, and was able to give his whole mind to the study of his favorite authors, the old English Classics, the best historians, and Paley and Priestley, of whom he was a great admirer.

He almost always read one or two hours in the morning, and as much in the evening. By the devotion of only this time to books, he was able in the course of his life to peruse many volumes of substantial value, of the contents of which his sound understanding and retentive memory enabled him to make readily a pertinent use.

In active benevolence and works of charity, he seems to have been indefatigable and unsurpassed. He was not able to bestow large donations on public

institutions, but he was a valuable friend, promoter, and director of some of the most important of them.* His private charities are not to be numbered. I believe that without much trouble he might be traced through every quarter of the city by the footprints of his benefactions. Pensioners came to the door of his house as they do in some countries to the gate of a convent. The worthy poor found in him a friend, and the unworthy he endeavored to reform. His aid to those in distress and need was in many cases not merely temporary and limited to single applications, but as extensive and permanent as the life and future course of its object. I think I may be allowed to mention, as one instance of this effectual species of charity, that one whole family of fatherless and motherless and destitute children, bound to him by no tie but that of human brotherhood, found a father in him, and owe to him, under Heaven, the respectability and comfort of their earthly condition. It would appear as if he had expressly listened to the exhortation of the son of Sirach, and had received the fulfilment of his promise: "Be as a father unto the fatherless, and as a husband unto their mother; so shalt thou be as the Son of the Most High, and he shall love thee more than thy mother doth."†

* He was particularly interested in the establishment of the Asylum for the Insane, and the Massachusetts General Hospital. He felt sure that these were charities worthy of all he could do to promote them, and he labored for them heartily and effectually.

† "He never," observes his son, "seemed to feel displeased when asked to relieve the necessities of his fellow beings, and therefore

As a friend and neighbor, his kind attentions and services were unremitting; — and how much of the happiness of our daily being is dependent on such attentions and services! He knew many persons, and suffered himself to forget none. If he had kept a list of them he could not have been more punctual in his remembrances; and he did keep a list of them in his friendly heart. But though he comprehended many in his generous regards, his strongest affections were still at home, reserved for the few who were nearest, and not dissipated or rendered shallow by the diffusion of his general charity. The stream of his benevolence was wide, but its central channel was deep.

His love of nature was ever fresh and warm. He watched the seasons as they rolled, and found in each much to excite his admiration and love of the great Creator and sovereign Disposer of all. The flowers, the birds, the sunshine, and the storm were objects of his continual notice, and of frequent remarks in his Diary. His habit of walking early

never hastily dismissed their claims, but carefully considered them, that he might give substantial and permanent aid.

“I cannot remember the time, when he was not planning for the benefit of several poor or afflicted persons. The last few years of his life were peculiarly blessed by visits from numerous persons, or the children of persons whom he had befriended.”

“There was a time when, as he afterwards thought, he was not discriminating enough in his charities. The reading of Malthus on Population, and the discussions which arose upon the publication of that work, modified considerably his views of true benevolence. Prevention of poverty seemed to him both more merciful and practicable than the relief of it: and he was therefore continually suggesting to those who were on the verge of poverty, principles of economy and kinds of labor, by which they were enabled to put themselves into a comfortable estate.”

in the morning, often before sunrise, which he persisted in regularly until about two years since, secured to him a season of daily communion with the beauties of Creation and its Author.

His love of children was ardent — and he inspired them with love for himself. It was his wish ever to have some children in his family. Their joyous laugh was music to his ear. After the death of his first born, he felt so lonely that he adopted a boy to supply the vacant place. And even within a few weeks of his decease, the son of a widow was brought by him to a home in his house.

This is a slight sketch of what he was to society and his friends. I shall now speak briefly of what he was to this Church; and his relation to it was so close and so long continued, that it calls for a separate mention.

When the members of the Old South congregation returned to their own house of worship, in 1783, after having occupied ours by permission for about five years, Mr. May, who was one of that congregation, and at that time in his twenty-third year, preferred to remain at the Chapel. In 1785 he was one of the twenty who voted to make those alterations in the Liturgy, which cut us off from the trinitarian communion, and caused us to be repudiated by the Episcopal Church; and in 1787 he was one of the small but resolved congregation who ordained the late Dr. Freeman by their own authority. These things took place more than half a

century ago ; and of that band of twenty, and that ordaining congregation — now that he is gone, — there is not one left. Minister and wardens and people — all are dead.

To the interests of this Church, from that time to the day of his death, Mr. May was always a steady and efficient friend. Its records, since the Revolution, bear witness to his services on almost every page. He served as Junior Warden with Dr. Bulfinch, in 1793 and 1794 — in 1795 with Mr. Charles Miller, and from 1798 to 1826, a term of twenty-eight years, with Mr. Ebenezer Oliver. It was mainly through his persevering applications that the ancient Records and Registers of the Chapel were obtained from the heirs of Dr. Caner, in England, in the year 1805 ; and his high estimation of the value of such documents, and particular attention to their preservation and regular continuance — which are too often reckoned as trivial matters, and unworthy the regard of a liberal mind — are abundantly justified by the fact, that since the recovery of these Records and Registers, property to a large amount has been secured, through their means and evidence, to the rightful possessors. But I mention this as one instance only of the attention which our friend uniformly rendered to the duties of his office and the interests of the Church.

On the services of the Church and the ordinances of religion as here administered, he was a constant attendant. And this was because he viewed them

in their proper light as the outward supports of order and virtue, and the good helps of piety, and not because he esteemed them as religion in themselves, or substitutes of religion: for if there ever was a man whose piety was practical, whose religion was life-religion, who could not understand or enter into any views of religion which were *not* practical, it was he.

He had borne many sorrows in the course of his protracted pilgrimage, and religion had supported him under them all. His belief in the sure mercies of God and promises of the Saviour was as firm and deeply rooted as the mountains. His faith in a future and better life was as sight. He saw its glories with his eyes, and the more distinctly as he drew nearer to them. Many expressions of his, simply and strongly declaratory of this sight-like faith, dwell, and will always dwell, on the memories of his relatives and most intimate friends.

His frame was so robust, his manner of living so regular, his mind so calm, his whole appearance so promising of endurance, that, aged as he was, even in his eighty-first year, I had thought he would yet continue for a season with us, and come up for many Sabbaths to our solemn assemblies. But it was not so to be. Till the Sunday before his death, he appeared as usual in his accustomed seat. For a few days afterwards, gentle intimations of death were given — hardly alarming to his friends, and not at all so to him, though he perfectly comprehended

their meaning. There was some aberration of mind, but no suffering of the body, — and then, to use the words of an old writer on the decease of a venerable prelate, “then he sweetly fell asleep in Christ, and so we softly draw the curtains about him.”

I cannot conclude without observing, that the funerals of the elders have of late been frequent in our society. The ancient pillars are falling, though others rise and stand in their places. The links which bound us to the far past are breaking. I am admonished to look more and more earnestly to the future, and to the restorations of the future, in the firm faith of our holy religion. The present pilgrimage appears more brief, the coming rest more permanent and desirable. We grow old, and decay, and die, that we may be renewed, and live without infirmity. We are separated in time, that we may be joined in eternity.

“As for my friends, they are not lost,
The several vessels of thy fleet,
Though parted now, by tempests tost,
Shall safely in the haven meet.”

[From the Boston Daily Advertiser.]

O B I T U A R Y .

Died, in this city, on the 27th of February, JOSEPH MAY, Esq. 81. Mr. May was a native of Boston, where he spent his long life, and was generally known to the inhabitants of the city. He was educated as a merchant, but for more than forty years before his decease, he was Secretary of a public Insurance Company, in which office it was his good fortune to be associated with a succession of men greatly distinguished for moral and intellectual endowments, by whom he was highly esteemed, and whose society excited and improved his own strong mind. Without pretensions to literary distinction, he acquired from books and exact observation a great store of knowledge on most subjects of interest and utility in the conduct of life. A retentive memory made him an instructive and amusing chronicler of the events of the last seventy years, (for he rarely lost a fact which had been once impressed on his mind,) and his extensive acquaintance with cotemporary society afforded innumerable illustrations of the character of the eminent men of that period, as well as of domestic occurrences.

He was born in an age more remarkable than the present for refined courtesy and formal politeness; when ease, negligence, and indifference were not so much admired as in this day, and a respect for the feelings and comfort of others were among the requisites of a well bred gentleman.

He was distinguished for active kindness and disinterestedness, and the writer (in the course of a pretty long life) has never known an individual who did more to promote the happiness of others than Mr. May. It was not his lot to move in an exalted sphere, or to influence the destinies of whole communities, by the powerful exertion of great talents: but in the humbler duties of a peace-maker, in reconciling aversions and restoring broken friendships; in reforming guilt and in raising weakness from despondency, he was actively engaged during his whole life; and those who were best acquainted with him, will admit that no day of his passed without some virtuous effort or benevolent action.

His occupations in business were laborious and incessant; yet by untiring industry, strict method, and economy of time, he made leisure for works of charity, and was enabled in very many instances, to aid those whose ignorance or inexperience in affairs had involved them in perplexities and embarrassments, from which their own skill was insufficient to release them. He rescued many orphan children from poverty, educated and brought them into life; and very few men in our city have, according to their means, bestowed so much money in acts of beneficence and on objects of public utility. This he accomplished with a small and limited income, by a wise and judicious frugality; and what is quite as remarkable, he was able to restrict his wants within the limits of his means, and never regretted what he could not obtain. He was an encouraging example to persons of moderate fortune, by proving that wealth and fashion are not essential to the highest respectability, and that a man who is not rich has within his reach advantages infinitely superior to riches.

Mr. May discharged various public trusts with honor and

fidelity. He neglected nothing and left nothing unfinished, which zeal and labor could accomplish. His disposition was extremely cheerful and social, and his life a very happy one. It was not, however, without severe and repeated domestic afflictions, which he bore with firmness and resignation: for he was religious in practice as well as in faith, and never forgot his dependence on God, or the great reckoning to which he was to be called.

He had no vices, and as few faults as belong to most men; and his friends will agree that they have rarely known his superior in virtue or wisdom.

